

I read so much on cooking that I began to assume an authoritative air. Became a sort of James Beard or a male version of Julia Chiles. Harbored deep envy of and scalding contempt for cooks better than myself.

Weekend guests at the ranch learned to brag on every morsel for fear the kitchen would suddenly close so far from another food source. (I won't repeat the story about the spoiled kid who refused to eat my shrimp dish until I ordered my then house boy to make him a Velveeta cheese sandwich.)

Part of the fun of the books, however, came in the form of collecting old cookbooks. In a copy of *Historic Recipes of Texas*, under "Tips For Stout Ladies," I learned that the secret in 1870 was "Avoid dainty and spindly chairs." Under "Ear/Removal of Objects" in 1850: "Take a horsehair about six inches long and double it to make a loop." A remedy for earache in 1860 that they said "never failed" was to put a pinch of black pepper on cotton batting and dip it in sweet oil to insert in the ear.

On domestic tranquillity, good advice offered for wives was: "Prevent quarreling by putting a root of sassafras in your mouth before he comes in the room in the morning." Unless sassafras trees were uprooted by married

couples in the early days of settlement, the roots must have been imported as none grow in the shortgrass country today. The final directions in the recipe were; "Fill your mouth in root and hold it until he goes away."

One winter, to go to school in Mertzon, I boarded with an old couple who sure needed sassafras root in a big way. Every morning he cooked her breakfast. Every morning she complained about her eggs and bacon being too done, or as she exclaimed, "Raw!" I never dared raise my head from my bowl of oatmeal to see if he had a mouth full of sassafras. Air passing through her false teeth sounded like the big snakes hissing in the Jungle Jim movies of that day. As brave as old Jungle Jim was, he'd have ducked that mean old sister.

Been a long time since a visitor asked for a recipe. The distance to town improves folks' manners. Bet it was hard to pout with a mouth full of sassafras root. Too bad marriage counselors don't have sassafras trees handy.

In 1980, I reclaimed the ranch house on the 09 Divide, armed with mouse baits and fumigating bombs. Took a summer to relocate the mice and spiders. Mud daubers and stinging scorpions retreated to the flowerbeds; yard creatures, such as snakes and lizards, moved back to the horse trap or lurked under the house.

Next part of the refurbishing was reviving Mother's kitchen. Without a plan, I bought more cookbooks than condiments and cooking utensils. Old Junior League cookbooks from various parts of the country were of special interest. Editions going back to the days before women joined the workforce reflected the food of different cities and different states.

Some recipes came from being brash enough to ask the waitress to ask the chef how he made such a particular dish. For example, I learned to prepare cold apricot soups while visiting the Georgia coast, shrimp and sesame asparagus sauté in California, and mango and blueberry fruit salad on a trip to the Carolinas. In an art museum cafeteria in St. Louis, a lady gave a five-minute lesson on making a carrot and orange ginger salad. A grumpy old guy in Boston in a back alley restaurant with the ludicrous name of "City Café" spent the time needed to flip on a burner to show how to turn shallots, butter and white wine melding into a sauce to go on any broiled fish from abalone to sea bass.

Same type of gruff skillet and pot juggler on the Gulf Coast of Texas muttered the secret of his vinaigrette, "almond oil," like he was passing on classified information from a CIA file. I ate two salads to break him down. I may

have written about his place in Port Aransas. He mastered his trade in San Francisco. Knows how to grill lamb shoulder chops to the very second of doneness. Buys mussels without a broken shell or a detached beard. Judges shrimp and sea bass so accurately by age and class that his specials make the entrants in the World Food Fair in Paris look shoddy as the blackboard menu in a chili joint in San Antonio.

But I kept on buying cookbooks until three shelves of one cabinet overfilled. Learned also that widows and retired wives were delighted to borrow from their library. Subscribed to snooty food magazines to further load the shelves. (I love to call *Gourmet Magazine* "a food magazine." Food magazine is as high a rating as the magazine deserves as long as the editor continues to recommend a bum restaurant in New Orleans.)